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Virtual Diasporas and the Dilemma of Multiple Belongings in Cyberspace

On 8 November 2008, the internationally renowned Chinese actor, Gong Li, was sworn into Singaporean citizenship at a simple ceremony. Photographed holding her right fist to her heart, the star of *Memoirs of a Geisha*, *Raise the Red Lantern* and *Red Sorghum*, pledged her allegiance to the city-state of which her husband is a native and in so doing, incurred the wrath of many Chinese netizens (Lim 2008). Vilified for being unpatriotic, Li was branded a traitor and a 'fake Chinese' by many Internet users of Chinese portals like Sohu, Sina, Chinaren and Chinanews (China Digital Times 2008; Macartney 2008). However, as many others reasoned, since neither China nor Singapore allows its citizens to hold dual nationalities Li's decision to opt for the safety and convenience of holding a less restrictive, more widely accepted Singaporean passport was perfectly rational (Pak 2008). In the midst of the media furore, a telling observation made by one Bi Shicheng was cited:

[y]ou would have expected, with globalisation, that nationality changes would become more common. It's interesting that the mentality of Chinese citizens has not kept pace (My Paper 2008).

This brief, almost throwaway remark encapsulated all the expectations, hopes, contradictions and problems embodied within the notion of multiple belongings and the ambivalence many Internet users display in their understandings of the issues at stake. In this paper, I intend to outline the dilemma that confronts those who participate in multiple belongings in cyberspace via virtual diasporas. I suggest that it springs from a mismatch between how diasporic belonging is understood and how it is practised online as well as the consequences that follow on from virtual enactments of diaspora.

Belonging and Diaspora

According to Anthias (2006), belonging has many dimensions but the most commonly understood is the affective dimension of belonging. Within this dimension, to belong is to feel safe, to be 'at home'. When individuals feel included and at home in a

community, they consider themselves part of its social fabric, fitting in and broadly subscribing to its values, meanings and expectations. Described differently, belonging can be understood as a desire or longing for a stable sense of emotional attachment, i.e. emotional fidelity (2006). Enduring commonalities are, therefore, basic to how a sense of belonging is formed and sustained. The types of commonalities round which communities cohere vary widely and range from the more traditional categories like culture, ethnicity, race, religion, ideology and nation to the less conventional ones like hobbies, short-term causes and interests.

Anthias (2006) argues that one of the reasons why belonging causes such angst is that while individuals look to the objects of their emotional attachment for stability and fixity, the objects themselves are invariably unstable. As ongoing, socio-political constructions of multiple intersecting factors, ethnicity, identity, and race, etc. are intrinsically destabilised. The more useful approach, according to Anthias, is for individuals to switch their sense of allegiance from objects of attachment to the struggles and sodalities round which belongings are formed and organised. Brubaker (2003) concurs but suggests that rather than focus on the struggles round which a sense of belonging is formed, belonging should be regarded as ‘processual, dynamic and relational’ in nature.¹ Understanding belonging to consist of a destabilised set of ties, he argues, renders the objects of belonging less fixed, substantial groups or entities and more like ‘practical categories, cultural idioms, cognitive schemas, discursive frames, organizational routines, institutional forms, political projects, and contingent events’ (ibid). Building on Spivak’s (1987) notion of ‘strategic essentialism’, Ang (2001) suggests a similar understanding to Brubaker, which views identity as the differentiated performance of identity dependent on context.

While the proposition seems eminently reasonable, how it might fruitfully be applied to categories that rely on essentialist understandings is yet to be satisfactorily worked out. One example would be diasporic belonging, which is the focus of this paper. According to Stratton (2000), there are two main understandings of the term ‘diaspora’. The first is pre-modern and linked to the organic notion of a scattering of seeds. It is this ‘early, religious usage of a dispersion ordained by God’ that is normally associated with the ‘mass movement’ of Jews ‘outside the Pale’ (ibid). The second understanding of diaspora has a distinctly modern flavour owing to its

association with the idea of a homogeneous national population spread out over a delimited territorial space. At the heart of the modern understanding of diaspora is the establishment of a discourse, a way of talking about people who 'are out of place' or displaced (Stratton 2000).

Importantly and perhaps in contradiction to Brubaker's suggestion of a processual, dynamic understanding of belonging, within both the pre-modern and modern meanings of diaspora, is the notion of a common point of origin, a homeland from which members of a diaspora are, in different degrees, scattered, exiled, banished, removed or separated. Within the complex processes of leave taking and nostalgia that constitute diasporic belonging, the yearning, as such, is for (re)connection to a point of origin, seeded by an implicit appeal to fixity and stability. However, where the pre-modern usage of diaspora speaks generally to a homeland, the modern one speaks specifically to a national homeland. There is, then, an innate incompatibility between the foundational understanding and the contemporary practice of diasporic belonging in the urge towards a more dynamic, less problematic and angst-ridden sense of belonging and, a form of emotional fidelity fixed, as it were, on its own North Star.

Can the notion of selectively performing one's identity and sense of belonging as advocated by Ang (2001) aid in the negotiation of belonging to a category like diaspora, which is almost doubly essentialist (nation and ethnicity) in its establishment? To begin answering these questions, I examine specifically the diaspora comprised by the overseas Chinese who at various times have been known as, *huáqiáo* (华侨), *huáyì* (华裔) and *hǎiwài huárén* (海外华人). One term increasingly in use in popular as well as professional literature and the media is 'Greater China' and this is the term I want to use here.

Like the concept of diaspora, the term 'Greater China' has older antecedents and as Harding (1993) relates, has its roots in the Chinese practice of regarding the regions of the empire 'directly controlled by the central administrative bureaucracy' as 'China Proper' and those regions outside of central administration but under the suzerainty of the Chinese as 'Outer China'. However, in contemporary usage, 'Greater China' as a concept incorporates 'three relatively distinctive themes: economic integration,

cultural interaction and political reunification within the international Chinese community' (ibid). It is mainly Greater China as cultural interaction that I am concerned with though the other two inter-related themes remain relevant. The core concept encapsulated in this usage of Greater China is the notion of a global Chinese culture, common to and binding all people of Chinese descent across the world, as described by Harding (1993).

Putting aside the dubious claim of a monolithic pan-Chinese culture as a substantive possession awaiting discovery by all those of Chinese descent, I intend to use three examples of the Chinese diaspora in (online) action to grapple with some of the issues that adopting a strategic, dynamic and processual understanding of multiple belongings might introduce. It is my argument that multiple national belongings extended in cyberspace through the mechanisms of virtual diaspora pose a dilemma for its adherents. Further, whilst superficially innocuous, the dilemma can substantially undermine and subvert the cause that is the nation.

The three examples of Chinese diasporic belonging I examine are Huayinet, the Overseas Chinese Network (OCN), and the British Born Chinese web site (hereafter BBCWS). Huayinet is an online repository on ethnic Chinese materials produced under the aegis of the Singaporean government (Huayinet 2008). OCN is a virtual 'community focused on Overseas Chinese people living in China' formed with the aim 'to provide social and networking opportunities in order to promote the development of our community' (Overseas Chinese Network 2008). BBCWS describes itself as a 'community driven web site' designed to 'provide a forum in which British Born Chinese can share experiences, ideas and thoughts' (British Born Chinese 2008). Since July 2007, the web site has been registered as 'British Chinese Online' (<http://www.britishchineseonline.com/>). As Parker and Song (2009) note, this is in part a technical problem to do with domain name registration but importantly also recognition of the fact that many Chinese in Britain are born elsewhere.

While the OCN community defines as Overseas Chinese anyone of Chinese background or heritage who grew up outside of mainland China, Huayinet simply includes all people of Chinese (*huá*) descent (*yí*) under the umbrella term of *huáyí* (Huayinet 2008). Interestingly, OCN also makes it a point to welcome (and hence, differentiate between) the 'western-born' (USA, Canada, Australia, etc), 'eastern-

born' (Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Japan, etc), the Chinese from Hong Kong, Taiwan and Macau, Chinese who have immigrated overseas and people of mixed Chinese/other(s) heritage. The BBCWS offers no definition of its constituency seemingly taking it for granted that the term is self-explanatory and perhaps, voluntary.

The different definitions that each diasporic community applies to their self-definitions of Overseas Chinese are symptomatic of the complexities and nebulosity surrounding this seemingly fixed and stable category. It is often an impoverished, stripped-down version of what is a very complex and diverse Chinese culture, deeply connected to a distant land with a long history of emigration that many diasporas base their sense of belonging on and build communities around. Additionally, as I argue in the next section, this simplification is further compounded when diasporic belonging is re-interpreted and enacted online.

Online Belonging

In a world where mobile citizens routinely seek employment, entertainment and sport away from the nation, being members of a diaspora and feeling emotionally attached to multiple communities are fast becoming, if not already accepted as, everyday occurrences. Indeed, multiple belongings and diaspora might well be regarded as two sides of the same coin. Nonetheless, having to answer to more than one source of allegiance — family, tribe/clan, gender, race and class — is not new and in a sense is an established part of human sociality. Every member of every community always holds more than a singular identity: a mother is also daughter and professional; a soldier, father and church elder; a teenager, consumer, user and niece.

The juggling of multiple emotional fidelities is no simple matter and includes the difficulties of dealing with conflicting loyalties, differing objectives and prioritising simultaneous needs. The employment of the Internet in the practice of these many belongings is, depending on one's viewpoint, an exacerbation or reanimation stimulated by the technology's enabling of access to multiple temporalities and spatialities, seemingly, at little to no cost to the individual or the various objects of emotional fidelity they pledge themselves to. The types and number of connections individuals can afford to maintain over the Internet appear to be circumscribed only

by their personal circumstances, discretion and limitations. Capitalising on the Internet's enabling of multiplicity, in both spatial and temporal terms, many users have created and sustained online connections that they might otherwise have forsaken, forgotten or not come into contact with. As such, an amazing variety of categories of belonging have been created, revived, maintained and extended to form communities varying from everyday hobbies and interest groups to more traditional categories like culture and religion. The optimism with which the Internet's earliest adopters greeted the prospects of rekindling sodalities with virtual communities (Rheingold 1993, Turner 2006) continue to influence and colour popular opinion towards online belongings.

Some part of the perception of near infinite multiplicities is fostered by the perception that, broadly speaking, non-work related activities conducted on the Internet are usually associated with play. Predominantly fun leisure activities pursued with a view to pleasure, amusement and/or escape, these online activities are understood as enhancements to life, on tap any time and any place where online access is available. Very often these activities also take on the nature of games as participation is largely voluntary and conducted entirely within set rules. This is, however, not to imply that these activities are frivolous, without value or real world import. As the inhabitants, suppliers and merchants of virtual worlds Second Life (<http://www.secondlife.com>) and World of Warcraft (<http://www.worldofwarcraft.com>) have proven, the actions, interactions and transactions that take place online have a slew of outcomes ranging from divorce to successful, if short-lived, careers trading in virtual treasures (Castronova 2005, 2007).

Writing of the mediapolis, Silverstone (2007) asserts that when consumption of media (including the new media of the Internet) is seen as play, it absolves participants of all responsibility beyond the need to abide by the rules. Additionally, he argues that substituting the materialism of face-to-face communication and action, with the symbolism of present-absent online interaction, undermines the expectation and sense of reciprocity and responsibility for the other (Silverstone 2007). Unlike relationships born of proximity in spaces like neighbourhoods, campuses and offices that place unavoidable demands on its participants, online participation consists of relationships that are provisional (Silverstone 2007). Not only do they break down under the

slightest pressure but because these online engagements are voluntary, they can also be shut down and/or opted out of at will. Hence, though participation in Internet games (and, by inference, virtual communities) can be meaningful, outside of having to abide by the rules, it is not onerous with responsibility.

This characteristic is supplemented by that which is highlighted whenever the Internet is cast as new media and compared to traditional media i.e. the Internet's democratic many-to-many system of narrowcasting (vis-à-vis broadcasting's one-to-many model) (Slevin 2000). While it is indeed the case that this is a basic and important difference in how the Internet is structured, what is also true is that in contrast to the multi-resourced, multi-armed 'one' referred to in the broadcast model, the 'many' denoted in the narrowcast model are singulars. That is to say that even though there are many users in the narrowcast model, they do not necessarily congregate when they contribute. Often, participation and involvement occurs asynchronously and in isolation. Consequently, not only is online participation game-like and care-free, it is also extremely individuated.ⁱⁱ

The singular, centripetal nature of Internet participation is especially pertinent here. For although online, virtual communities are held up as exemplars of grass-roots empowerment and collective agency, the Internet is up to now still a 'private, exclusive and fragmenting medium' (Silverstone 2007). Because players and participants can log on and take part in communities from any computer networked to the Internet, the onus on them to engage in the face-to-face social interaction that constitutes and nurtures the sense of emotional attachment that comprises a significant component of belonging is absent. Indeed, as Silverstone puts it, digital technologies disconnect as well as connect, exchanging the materialism of everyday action and communication with the symbolism of belonging (Silverstone 2007).

I suggest that one reason the symbolic character of belonging has gained such purchase with regards to diasporic virtual communities is the (mis)appropriation of Anderson's (1991) theorisation of the nation as 'imagined political community'. According to Anderson, the nation can be defined thus because it is first conceived through an act of imagination that allows fellow members to experience a 'communion' of 'deep, horizontal comradeship' (Anderson 1991). That such a conception is, in his formulation, fostered across spatio-temporal differences and

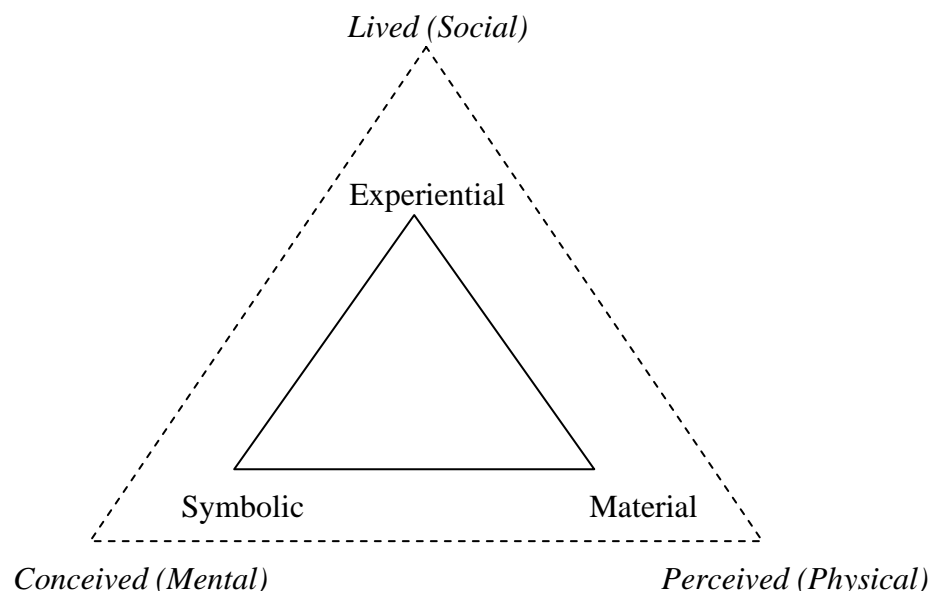
aided in part by print technology has been seized upon and made much of by those who argue that a lack of proximity is no obstacle to the rise of virtual diasporic communities (Yang 2003). I contend this to be a misappropriation of Anderson's theorisation of nation as imagined political community because though conceived with and through an act of imagination, the nation is nevertheless maintained and rehearsed through the very material acts of seeing, saying and doing. These are reinforced through the repeated proliferation of national symbols in everyday situations such as the flag displayed in the forecourt of a petrol station described by Billig (1995) in *Banal Nationalism* and maps as logos on letterheads, posters, building walls and consumer products (Anderson 1991). Nevertheless, despite Anderson's insistence that 'the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life', it is the symbolic element of national belonging that has most captured popular imagination, expanding and extending the 'cyberbole' (Woolgar 2002) and nostalgia surrounding virtual communities.

This brings us back to a point that I want to problematise here: Silverstone's (2007) assertion that the material is substituted with the symbolic in online interactions. It is my suggestion that the material-symbolic binary through which Silverstone conceives online participation misrecognises what takes place when belonging is enacted online. Put simply, when individuals visit sites like Huayinet, OCN and BBCWS, what they desire and perform is not so much a replacement of the materialism of belonging to Greater China with its symbolism as the experience of diasporic belonging itself. The symbolism, values and meanings that are thought to comprise cultural China, feed into and are the resources members of the Chinese diaspora draw on to inform their online experience of belonging.

The relationship between the three — symbolic, experiential and material — might be more properly comprehended if viewed as triadic. To further elucidate the shift I propose that Lefebvre's (1991) famed conception of space as existing in three states: conceived, lived and perceived be superimposed over the symbolic-experiential-material triad. Although Lefebvre's work pertains specifically to space, I think it worthwhile to extend the conceived-lived-perceived triad to online belonging because of the insight it lends to the social experience of virtual diasporas.

To begin with, Lefebvre maintains that space can be considered in three ways: mentally, physically and socially. While mental space is conceived and physical or material space is perceived, social space is lived. Within this relational triad, mentally constructed space can be thought of as representations of space, physically constructed space to be born of spatial practices and socially constructed spaces to be representational space — the space of ‘users’, a ‘dominated space... which the imagination seeks to change and appropriates’ (Lefebvre 1991). Accordingly, a space is never a given, predetermined by some other person or institution vested with power. Instead, each space is socially formed and experienced from moment to moment, as agents (or, in this case, Internet users) draw together the physical and the textual through their inhabitation of said space. Each lived experience of space is, thus, a social construction of its moment informed by the relations with and between its inhabitants. For this reason, the lived is defined by Lefebvre as ‘the materialization of social being’.ⁱⁱⁱ

Reduced to a schematic, the first consequence of the proposed superimposition of the Lefebvre’s triad of the conceived-lived-perceived over the relational triad of symbolic-experiential-material is an equating of the symbolic with the conceived, the material with the perceived and the experiential with the lived (see diagram below).



Viewed through the triadic lens of conceived-lived-perceived, it quickly becomes apparent that instead of abstracting, symbolising or practising cultural China, participants of virtual diasporas connecting online with Greater China are living the

experience of being part of a pan-Chinese diaspora. Neither the materialism nor the symbolism of national belonging is replaced rather each becomes a constituent of how Chinese-ness is experienced. This is a small but crucial differentiation that in combination with other characteristics goes some way towards an explanation of what I refer to as the dilemma of multiple belongings in cyberspace.

Take for example, the members of popular Chinese portals, Sohu, Sina, Chinaren, Chinanews mentioned at the start of this paper who decried Gong Li's 'betrayal' of the Chinese nation in trading in her Chinese citizenship for a Singaporean one. While no figures exist that this author knows of for differentiating between members that live within China from those outside, it seems reasonable to assume that a fair number of their members and contributors consider themselves part of Greater China. Their comments, vilification and debates consist of many features that derive broadly from the symbolism and materialism of what being part of Cultural Chinese means and is for many.

It is possible that some part of the intensity of the condemnation with which her detractors met Li's transfer of allegiance from China to Singapore draws on the historical contempt that China as a nation (and civilisation) regards those who leave ancestors and ancestral lands (Nyíri 2002). Treated as disloyal, dishonourable and ungrateful, these miscreant émigrés were for long centuries branded traitors and while the state's stance towards them has changed significantly, it is conceivable for such deeply embedded attitudes to have residual affects. The online criticism Gong Li's high profile 'throwing off' of Chinese citizenship for another attracted seems at least to offer some evidence of this. At the same time, the vehemence of the reactions might also be construed as owing something to the material act of departure, the leave-taking that follows on from Li's choice. Leaving always entails the leaving behind of others. In a highly competitive national environment where millions of rural and urban workers are constantly on the move to and from the cities in search of employment and advancement (Bristow 2008), the politics of envy surrounding someone who has successfully made the leap from countryside and city to outside of the nation cannot be discounted.

Li's supporters, who by their own frank admission would gladly exchange the problems and limitations of Chinese citizenship for another if it was possible (Pak

2008), live a different experience of what being a part of Greater China is about. In this instance, Li's supporters might easily be seen to have been informed by the newer, more positive symbolism associated with being a *xin yimin* or new migrant (Kuhn 2008). The complex symbolism of the change of status from mainland Chinese to overseas Chinese and the associated political latitude that comes with it, interlocks with the changed material conditions of mobility that derive from being a citizen of the seemingly, bland and inoffensive developed nation like Singapore. Compared to the vagaries of holding the passport of a controversial, developing country that is China, the advantages of Li's choice to her fellow (would-be) emigrants are clear enough. As one fellow Chinese cited in Pak's report put it, '[a] lot of times when Chinese do things it's for practical reasons, to make life easier and for more financial gain'. In fact, one might argue that their more relaxed attitude more readily embraces the aspect of Greater China as Cultural China, one that extends well beyond the territorial boundaries. In contrast, there was a distinct lack of interest let alone umbrage expressed anywhere on the OCN, Huayinet and BBCWS websites over the issue.

The Dilemma

Voluntary, playful, void of responsibility beyond the game and above all focused on the experience of the individual, as forms of emotional fidelity, sites like Huayinet, OCN and BBCWS seem perfect for extending national belonging beyond territorial boundaries. This is all the more relevant since online belonging can be long, short or medium term. As political allegiance, online belonging can slide between the poles from weak to strong. And as avenues for reconnection to a national homeland from which members have been displaced, virtual diasporic sites are never distant but always^{iv} within reach. A person can subscribe to as many of these communities as they wish without fear of reprisal. Or so it would seem.

The idea that the material has been replaced with the symbolic in cyberspace is common but no less an elision for that. However, this does not mean that the qualities with which Silverstone characterises online participation — playful, voluntary and absolved of responsibility beyond preset rules — are no longer valid. If anything, they are doubly applicable because of the Internet user's ability to opt in and out of online belonging, a strategic insertion and removal not always practical if one is materially

situated within the locus of belonging. The main difference between on and offline national belonging, then, is the absence or dislocation, if you like, of the body.

It is my argument that virtual diasporas raise issues for multiple belongings in cyberspace on two fronts: the individual and the communal. The first, because contrary to the voluntary nature of online participation, the type of belonging virtual diasporas promote is assumed to be pre-determined by birth, fixed in history, mandatory and inescapable, awaiting only (re)discovery. Such belonging is bounded and exclusionary, and demands that members be partial to its values, meanings and causes. This argues against the understanding of belonging as processual, dynamic and relative, precisely the approach that, according to Brubaker (2003), renders multiple online belongings somewhat easier to create, sustain and negotiate. Nonetheless, if one can selectively perform diasporic belonging as per Ang's (2001) suggestion, this is an issue that individuals might be able to ameliorate.

What constitutes the larger part of the dilemma, in my opinion, is the question that follows on from the strategic performance of diasporic belonging. At what cost is the selective enactment of belonging performed and just who might be most affected? I suggest that beyond the first problem of tricky handling for the individual, the main dilemma that multiple belongings in cyberspace pose is the diminution of responsibility. In other words, virtual diasporic belongings exert little by way of the responsibilities and reciprocities of membership on its participants. This want of accountability, as Anderson (1994) points out, makes long-distance nationalism a dangerous sort of game.

I want to further stress that moving the experience of belonging to cyberspace is more than a mere stretching of emotional attachment. Far from a simple extension, what is produced when national belonging is multiplied and transferred online is a reduced experience of what it means to be part of a nation. The full measure of national belonging cannot be condensed into voluntary participation for the individual. It is constituted and nurtured through an amalgam of thousands of small, everyday gestures, actions, interactions and reciprocities that people placed in a neighbourhood, a school and a community face together. While many of these exchanges are voluntary, others are less anticipated and often, undesired, but it is the closing off of options and the pressing demands forced on those physically dwelling with each other

within territorial boundaries that constitute a substantial part of the experience of belonging to a nation. There is, in a sense, a strong, visceral element to national belonging that no amount of long-distance engagement can replace. Affective and ethereal belonging it might be, but it is not emotional fidelity conditioned by the body's location. In Lefebvrian terms, the nation is embodied in each instance through the social constitution of the abstract notions by which it is conceived and the practices by which it is perceived. While long-distance national belongings are attractive propositions that appeal to the nomadic urge dormant within many would-be cosmopolitans, long-distance national belonging extended and practised online are mutations.

In the final analysis, although the nation is conceived and constructed in imagination, being part of a nation is an excluding, bounded affair that does not easily permit more than one process. And while the Internet might allow its users to experience multiple belongings, they are of the impoverished, malnourished kind. In diasporic virtual communities, the restless and singular technology of the Internet has been utilised to promote and extend the paradox of multiple belongings based on exclusionary, essential ties. This, I contend, is the dilemma that multiple belongings in cyberspace pose for national belonging.

ⁱ Elsewhere Brubaker suggests with Cooper that rather than the term identity it would be more helpful to speak of identification and categorisation as, according to them, these terms signify more accurately the heterogeneous, malleable and processual nature of the groupings round which allegiances form. (Brubaker, R & Cooper, F 2000).

ⁱⁱ Even LAN (Local Area Network) gaming where groups of people gather at a physical location to play a game, the 'play' is conducted by each person through their individual consoles.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lived space is also sometimes referred to as social space by Lefebvre (1991).

^{iv} The usual caveats on Internet access and availability notwithstanding.

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